

Transportation bill update

Written by Vicki Needham
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Although lawmakers haven't made any headway on long-term transportation legislation, some funding for the nation's crumbling roads and bridges will probably land in a jobs-creation package Democratic leaders are angling to consider next month and into the new year.

In recent weeks, transportation policy has moved up the Congressional and White House agendas as leaders consider ways to spur job growth and combat a 10.2 percent unemployment rate.

So far, Congress has passed two short-term extensions since the 2005 transportation law expired Sept. 30, taking a pass on a \$500-billion, six-year reauthorization bill proposed by House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman James Oberstar (D-Minn.).

House leaders have set a Dec. 18 deadline to vote on a jobs bill — matching the expiration date of the current transportation extension -- that could include a mix of infrastructure spending, tax credits for employers and aid to states.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has directed several House committees to determine the amount to include in the measure for infrastructure projects.

For months, Oberstar and several other lawmakers including Sen. George Voinovich (R-Ohio) have argued that passage of a transportation bill or targeted infrastructure spending could spur job growth and provide a boost to the ailing economy.

Voinovich recently sent a letter to President Barack Obama writing: "I believe that a transportation reauthorization bill is critical to job creation, improving the nation's transportation infrastructure and reducing our carbon footprint." He is pushing for passage of a comprehensive bill by next spring.

Meanwhile, a bipartisan group of seven Senators from the committees of jurisdiction wrote a letter to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) requesting a cloture vote to move forward with a six-month extension that would likely leave the 2005 formulas in place.

That extension stalled in September when some fiscal conservatives suggested tapping leftover money from the financial bailout to pay for the measure.

At this point, Oberstar isn't "laying down any markers" for the next extension, according to a committee spokesman.

Earlier this month, Obama said his economic team was looking at ways to provide more cash to transportation projects around the country. Previously, the White House had focused its attention on passage an 18-month extension of current law.

Whatever the actual impact of a jobs bill or a six-month extension on jobs, Oberstar's major

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priorities — cutting carbon dioxide emissions, reducing vehicle traffic along with the nation's demand for oil — will have to wait for now.